



Planning Update

Proposed East Grasslands Wildlife Management Area Expansion

Planning Update #2

August 2000

Recap of Year's Events

This is the second planning update of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) on the agency's proposal to expand the East Grasslands Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in the northern San Joaquin Valley of Merced County, California. The Service initiated public scoping for the proposed expansion of the WMA and the associated conservation easement program in 1998 after obtaining the approval of the Service's Director to begin detailed planning. During the winter and spring of 1998/1999 the Service sought and received comments from landowners; the general public; state, county, and local governments; and other interest groups regarding the approximately 15,000-acre expansion area.

Many of the individuals and organizations that provided comments suggested that the Service consider a larger, more contiguous study area. Based on these comments the Service conducted a more detailed study of existing native and irrigated pasture lands, vernal pool complexes, seasonal and permanent wetlands, and riparian corridors that may be suitable for protection and help achieve the Service's wildlife management

objectives for the region. As the result of this analysis, the Service developed a revised study area for expansion of the WMA boundary (Figure 1). The Manager for the Service's California/Nevada Operations and the Regional Director, then forwarded a request to the Director of the Service to expand the approved 15,000-acre study area to approximately 45,000 acres. This request has been approved by the Director and the Service is now prepared to continue the public scoping process on the merits of this proposal.

Service History in the East Grasslands

The 36,550-acre East Grasslands WMA was established by the Service in 1979 to complement the management of the adjoining San Luis and Merced National Wildlife Refuges and has since contributed to the recovery of migratory waterfowl populations under the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. The WMA remains privately owned land protected by conservation easements. Daily management of the easement area remains under private landowner control, with the majority of the properties being managed for cattle grazing, low intensity agricultural, and waterfowl hunting.



How Does Wildlife Benefit?

The grasslands of central Merced County support a diversity of wildlife habitats including declining native California grasslands, rare vernal pools, seasonal and permanent wetlands, and remnant riparian habitat along a network of sloughs and creeks. These habitats support large wintering populations of migratory waterfowl, shorebirds, and sandhill cranes, and federally listed threatened and endangered species including four species of freshwater crustacea, wintering Aleutian Canada geese, and resident populations of the San Joaquin kit fox and blunt-nosed leopard lizard. Protection of the area would also contribute to maintenance of one of the last remaining wildlife corridors across California's San Joaquin Valley.

What Does Expansion Mean to Landowners?

Expansion of the East Grasslands Wildlife Management Area would provide those landowners whose property is within the expansion area with an opportunity to sell a conservation easement on their property to the Service on a willing seller basis at fair market value.

Landowners whose property is within the WMA conservation easement area, but who do not wish to participate in the program, retain all property rights and are not required to participate. Inclusion within the WMA boundary simply provides the landowner with the option to sell an easement and participate in preservation of important wildlife habitat while preserving California's open space, agriculture, and rural life style.

Relationship to Merced County's Agricultural and Open Space Plans?

The establishment of an expanded WMA is consistent with the Merced County General Plan's goals for preservation of agricultural lands and open space. On July 25, 2000, the Merced County Board of Supervisors approved implementation of the California Land Conservation Act of 1965, better known as the Williamson Act. This program, in place in 50 of California's 58 counties, provides tax reductions for lands under contract in exchange for maintaining land in agricultural uses for a period of ten years. The Agricultural Preserve, established by Merced County for the Williamson Act program, overlaps with the Service's proposed expansion area for the East Grasslands WMA.

In fact, the Service's conservation easement program and the Williamson Act agricultural preservation program overlap and complement each other in many counties throughout California. Properties within a WMA easement area remain eligible for the Williamson Act program. Landowners whose property falls within a Service WMA and the Williamson Act program are frequently compensated by both programs for maintaining their properties in agriculture production while providing benefits to California's wildlife.

Because properties within a WMA boundary that are enrolled in the Service conservation easement program remain in private ownership, property taxes and other assessments for Merced County will remain unaffected.



The Next Step - Continued Public Scoping

The Service's mission, established by Congress, is to conserve the Nation's wildlife resources for the enjoyment of future generations. While the Service believes that expansion of the East Grasslands WMA would contribute to the long-term recovery and protection of wildlife resources in the San Joaquin Valley of California, expansion of the WMA will not occur without public input and support.

Now that the Service's California/Nevada Planning Office has received approval to study a larger focus area, the Service is seeking your help in determining if the WMA should be expanded. The Service specifically wants to hear from landowners within the study area, from other Federal, state, county and local agencies, and from other interested individuals and groups. The Service wants to meet with you over the next several months to provide information on the proposed expansion of the conservation easement program in Merced County, and to answer questions and receive comments you may have.

Next Public Workshop - A public workshop has been scheduled for September 6, 2000, at the Merced County Agricultural Center, 2135 Wardrobe Avenue, Merced, California, from 6:30 P.M. to 8:30 P.M. The workshop will begin with a short presentation regarding the Service's revised expansion proposal, followed by a brief question and answer period, and a breakout session for more site specific questions and comments.

Other Ways to Comment - We encourage both workshop participants and those who cannot attend to provide us with written comments to ensure that they are addressed in the Land Protection Plan and Environmental Assessment that will be released later

in the public review process. We also encourage you to contact us by telephone or e-mail. If you would like to meet with us individually or in a smaller group please do not hesitate to contact us to arrange such a meeting.

For More Information

We are available to answer your questions and provide additional information regarding the Service's proposal and the planning process. If you have questions, concerns, or would like more information please feel free to call, e-mail, or write us:

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Anticipated Planning Schedule

The Service anticipates that the planning for the proposed expansion of the WMA will proceed as follows:

<i>Public Scoping -</i>	Aug. to Oct. 2000
<i>Public Review of Land Protection Plan/Environmental Assessment</i>	Nov. to Dec. 2000
<i>Release Decision Document</i>	Jan. 2001

Please pass this planning update along to anyone you think might be interested in the planning process.

Please call or write to us to be placed on our mailing list or to report a change in your mailing address.
